

Warm yourself with laughter: 'The Mystery of Irma Vep'

BY DIANE GALE ANDREASSI

SPECIAL WRITER

"It's kind of like doing the impossible," explained Greg McFadden, who with Rami Sanders will create a blur of energy and genius in the wildly energetic spoof, *The Mystery of Irma Vep*, playing at Meadow Brook Theatre.

The two actors play eight parts in the hilarious play that pokes fun at just about every acting genre from Penny Dreadfuls, a popular theatrical form in Victorian England, to gothic movies, like *Rebecca* and *Wuthering Heights*, and campy horror flicks showing mummies and werewolves.

Audiences will be treated to a buffet table of delicious giggles and surprises in playwright Charles Ludlam's production that has hints of a Mel Brooks movie or Monty Python skit.

"You sweat an awful lot and every time you go back stage you're constantly wiping your face and drinking as much water as you can," McFadden said. "I eat at least two bananas every show just to make it through."

Many theatergoers try to uncover as many film and literary references as possible in the "tour de force" winner of two Obie Awards and a Special Drama Desk Award running through Sunday, Feb. 3.

With electric speed, McFadden and Sanders play an Egyptologist with a new bride, a housekeeper with a wooden leg, an Egyptian princess dead for hundreds of years, a ghostly intruder, mummy, werewolf and other interesting characters.

A laugh a minute.
"It's nothing but fun," Sanders said. "Once you get the charac-

ters down, you find your way into this heightened reality, and you always have to keep this level of energy up. It's got to come out of an oddly truthful place. It's like getting on a roller coaster and enjoying the ride —

— hopefully for the audience too."

The story, hinging on the plot of the classic, *Rebecca*, focuses on the deceased Lady Hillcrest who looms over the misty bog of Mandrake Manor, a haunted house, where Lord Edgar, a renowned Egyptologist lives with his new wife.

Sanders and McFadden play them all.

"The costumes are rigged so they come off very quickly," said McFadden, who studied at Juilliard. "Everything about the show is geared with the quick changes in mind. Part of it is theatrical illusion. It seems like a shorter amount of time to the audience than it actually is."

He credits a crew of six people backstage for helping pull off the "impossible."

"There are three times the amount of people backstage than on stage helping to make it happen and they're as much a part of the illusion as we are," McFadden said.

Sound designer Tony Vaillancourt is one of the many faces audiences don't see. Vaillancourt, a Watertown resident and technical advisor to the theater program for the community school district, makes sure the set design is truly eerie.

Sanders and McFadden come to the table with experience having performed *The Mystery of Irma Vep* for six weeks at the Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park. Michael Haney, the direc-

tor for the Meadow Brook productions, was the director there, as well.

"It was a huge hit," McFadden said. "They extended us a few times and we were sold out regularly almost before we opened."

"Cincinnati had done the play 10 years before that and the audience just loved it. They were really excited when we came back to do it," explained McFadden who has acted in various New York theaters, including The Actors Company Theatre, the Kennedy Center and numerous regional theaters. Audiences may recognize his distinctive voice, which was featured in National Public Radio's *Titanic: The Unsinkable Myth*.

The endearing appeal of the show comes from the humor that is so many different levels, Haney said.

"There is something for everyone," he added. "From physical comedy, to double entendres, slapstick, and vaudeville, this has more laughs per minute than anything I have ever been involved with."

Warm reception

Referring to a warm reception from audiences in Cincinnati, Haney directed the play there with Sanders and McFadden.

"With the bleak mid-winter upon us, it's a great show and once you get to the theater you can warm yourself with laughter," said Haney who has twice received the Cincinnati Entertainment Award. He also worked at the Sacramento Theater Company and the Endin' Brings Fingo Festival.

It's not necessary to know the old movie that the play refers to, Haney said comparing it to *Young Frankenstein*, which captures the style of the original movie, but twists it enough to make it funny. The exaggerations push people in the audiences "out of their seats" as they double over in laughter, Haney said. "That's what we hope will happen here."

The Mystery of Irma Vep premiered in 1984 at Ludlam's

Ridiculous Theatre Company in New York.

The play starred Ludlam with his partner Everett Quinton and represented his most successful theatrical production. After playing more than 300 performances in New York City, the show was revived in 1998 Off-Broadway and in theaters across the world.

Early theatrical encounters

Ludlam's first encounter with the theater was a *Punch and Judy* show and freak shows at the Minnesota State Fair. At age seven he was writing and staging his own plays. When he was 17 he founded his first theater company. After graduating from college, he joined New York City's Playhouse of the Ridiculous, designing and building sets, acting and directing. In 1967 he renamed it the Ridiculous Theatre Company, and all of his plays were produced there. He was the company's artistic director.

Ludlam continued to act on stage and in TV episodes of *Miami Vice*. He taught at New York University and Yale University, and created two black and white films: *The Sorrows of Dolores* and *Museum of Wax*. Ludlam died in 1987.

Diane Gale Andreassi is a resident of Livonia and writes about a variety of topics, including theater, for the Observer & Eccentric Newspapers.

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